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SUBJECT: WAITING FOR GUL -- ARMENIANS CONTEMPLATE POSSIBLE HISTORIC VISIT

Classified By: CDA JOSEPH PENNINGTON FOR REASONS 1.4(B)(D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) As the decision point nears for Turkey's response to President Sargsian's invitation to President Gul to visit Yerevan for the September 6 Turkey-Armenia soccer match, Yerevan is rife with speculation about how Armenians would react to such a visit. Senior officials have gone out of their way to assure that there will be no unpleasant incidents at the match, but a key leader of the nationalist Dashnaksutyun, a junior partner in the ruling coalition that received just 6 percent of the vote in the May 2008 presidential election, told the Charge on August 29 that his party will "ensure that Gul does not leave Yerevan with the impression that Armenians have forgotten about the genocide."

The Dashnaks have shared their plans -- which they claim will remain "civilized and cultured" -- with Sargsian, who has reportedly asked them to stand down. As the junior partner in Sargsian's coalition the Dashnaks will not want to overplay their hand, but we believe it likely that they will make their presence felt. Most ordinary Armenians would be happy to see Gul in Yerevan, but have little expectation that he will really come. End Summary.

GOAM NERVOUSLY AWAITS REPLY FROM ANKARA

¶2. (C) With the September 6 World Cup Qualifying match between Turkey and Armenia fast approaching, senior Armenian officials are anxiously awaiting news from Ankara on whether the match will also feature a historic visit to Yerevan by Turkish President Abdullah Gul. In two separate meetings with CDA over the past week, Foreign Minister Nalbandian has asked whether we had heard any news about which way Gul is leaning, and asked us to speculate on what might be the perceived obstacles from the Turkish side. When CDA suggested that possible demonstrations might be a source of concern to Ankara, Nalbandian went out of his way to assure that the authorities would be in full control of the situation. "President Sargsian is going to do everything to ensure that President Gul's visit is successful from the minute he arrives in Yerevan until the minute his plane takes off for Ankara," the FM said.

¶3. (C) Nalbandian brushed off rumors that the nationalist Dashnaksutyun, a junior partner in Sargsian's coalition, are planning demonstrations if the visit takes place. "Of course we may not be able to prevent one or two people from holding up a sign," he said, "but that shouldn't prevent him from coming." Deputy FM Kirakossian also raised the issue on August 29, and echoed Nalbandian's contention that a Gul visit would pass without major incident. When CDA asked whether some in the crowd might show disrespect to Gul by

boeing during the Turkish national anthem, Kirakossian acknowledged that it was a possibility, but said it would be "nothing more serious than what happens when Turkey plays against Greece."

DASHNAKS: WE HAVE TO DO SOMETHING

¶ 14. (C) When asked about his party's intentions in the event of a visit by President Gul, Armen Rustamian, a parliamentarian from Dashnaktsutyun and a member of the party's executive board, was open and direct: "we cannot allow President Gul to leave Yerevan thinking that the Armenians have forgotten about the genocide." Rustamian said that while the Dashnaks "do not oppose a dialogue with Turkey," they believe that "consideration of historical issues" (read: Turkey's recognition of the genocide) must come first. Rustamian insisted that the Dashnaks' protest actions would be "civilized and cultured," and that the party would ensure that its followers did not cross the line of disrespecting President Sargsian's guest. He claimed that when the Armenian Catholicos visited Istanbul recently, a group of Turks held up signs that read "Welcome to Hell." "We will avoid anything like that," he said.

¶ 15. (C) In fact, Rustamian argued that "it would be best if the Dashnaks take on this role" rather than leaving an opening for "freelance protesters" who would be more difficult to control. "We have a pretty good record of enforcing discipline," he added. (Comment: The Dashnaktsutyun, which has strong roots throughout the

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Armenian diaspora, is a highly regimented, top-down organization that, as Rustamian suggests, places a premium on party discipline. End comment.) When pressed on what specific actions the Dashnaks were planning, Rustamian was evasive, but said that the party would publicly announce all the measures it planned to take at a press conference one or two days in advance of Gul's arrival.

¶ 16. (C) Rustamian acknowledged that he had discussed the Dashnaks' plans with President Sargsian and leaders of the two other coalition parties. "They are against us, 3-1," he said, "but we are used to that." He strongly suggested that Sargsian has asked the Dashnaks to stand down, but insisted that it would be "politically impossible" for the party to "do nothing."

WORD ON THE STREET: "LET HIM COME"

¶ 17. (U) Most ordinary Armenians we have spoken with seem intrigued by the possibility of a Gul visit. A group of 60-something women working at the museum at Sardarapat, a site 25 miles west of Yerevan where Armenian forces turned back the Turks in 1918, nodded in the affirmative when asked whether Gul should come to Yerevan. One of the women stepped forward and said "let him come, but we should also be careful. The Turks can be pretty tricky." While few Armenians (including in the media) have spoken out in opposition to Sargsian's invitation, most people here view a Gul visit as a remote possibility. "Of course it was a good idea," one young professional told us, "but we know he won't come." Although Armenians acknowledge that some may want to create problems if a visit were to take place, most do not expect significant protests. They point to the fact that the August 20 match between the Armenian and Turkish youth soccer teams, held at the same stadium in which the September 6 match will take place, went off without a hitch. (In a significant upset, the Armenians won 2-1). A close embassy contact who is an enthusiastic supporter of a Gul visit told us his major concern is not public protests, but rather "the possibility that the Turks could beat us 14-1. Would that

really be good for reconciliation?"

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Our best guess is that the Dashnaks will organize some sort of protest but, in deference to President Sargsian, will do that in such a way as to minimize any public embarrassment to President Gul. From Rustamian's comments to us, it seems that Sargsian may have cut a deal in which such actions would be tolerated in exchange for the Dashnaks' help in controlling their more militant followers who may be inclined to do more. We have no doubt that the authorities will do their best to muzzle (something they do well) any freelancers who try to spoil the event. Nevertheless, the unprecedented nature of the visit, assuming it takes place, adds an element of unpredictability that makes precise forecasting difficult.

PENNINGTON